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# BURIALS, CORPSES AND OFFERINGS IN THE BRONZE AGE OF NW IBERIA AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AND MEMORY

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**Abstract:** In this text we analyse several materialities related to the world of death during the Bronze Age in the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula with the purpose of discussing the long-term role of the corpses, the sepulchral places and the offerings as agents of legitimization of the territory, of memory and of creation and maintenance of the group identity.

The first framed hypothesis is that there seems to be different conceptions of death between the highlands, associated with communities with a more pastoral way of life, and the lowlands, more in connection with agricultural societies. The second one establishes that in both types of communities it was always in the Early Bronze when corpses had a greater weight as agents of legitimization of territory and identity. Finally, the third and last hypothesis assumes that from the Middle Bronze Age on the scenarios of power negotiation and maintenance are gradually transferred and spread into other contexts, such as the sites with rock engravings, the places of metal deposits and the settlements themselves. This may be in accordance with the possible increase of the practice of cremation in which the “consumed body” loses “visibility”.

**Key-words:** Northwest of Iberian Peninsula; Bronze Age; corpses, burials; funerary practices; new structuration of the landscape; new ideological conceptions; places of identity and social memory

**Résumé:** Nous analysons plusieurs aspects concernant la mort et le monde des morts au cours de l'Âge du Bronze dans le Nord-ouest de la Péninsule Ibérique. Nous cherchons à identifier et à comprendre le rôle des cadavres, des tombes et des offrandes et leur lien avec l'identité, la mémoire et le territoire du groupe.

Trois hypothèses sont avancées. La première considère l'existence de différentes notions de la mort, séparant les communautés humaines habitant sur les hauteurs et dans la plaine. La seconde admet que, pendant le début de l'Âge du Bronze, les corps jouaient un rôle majeur dans la reconnaissance de l'identité du territoire, au sein des deux communautés. À partir du Bronze moyen, la troisième théorie considère que le pouvoir est acquis et maintenu à l'aide d'autres apports, comme les zones d'art pariétal, les caches d'objets métalliques et les propres villages. Cela peut s'accorder avec la possibilité d'augmentation des crémations, puisque les corps brûlés perdent leur visibilité.

**Mot-clés:** Nord-ouest de la Péninsule Ibérique; l'Âge du Bronze; cadavres; tombes; pratiques funéraires; nouvelle structuration du paysage, nouvelles conceptions idéologiques; lieux d'identité et de mémoire sociale

## GOALS AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The main goal of this text is to make a synthesis of the social role of death during the Bronze Age in the NW of the Iberian Peninsula by analyzing the ways how the burial contexts, the corpses and the funerary practices acted on the construction, maintenance and transformation of social identity.

For the achievement of these objectives we have assumed some presuppositions enunciated hereafter: Firstly that in their most diverse and ample manifestations materialities are metaphors, simultaneously material and social ones, for they are the outcome of socially determined actions as much as they are socially active agents (Barret 2001). Secondly that these materialities are immersed or incorporated in the natural space, are not dissociated from it, and consequently in the case of death there is an intense interaction between the corpse and its deposition contexts. Thirdly that the individuals live in society and so their bodies and actions incorporate, reproduce and reflect social identity as well as they facilitate the practical and social involvement of the communities with the world around them. Hence we focus the study of death on the actions of the living, for death (which includes the body transformation) and the corpse are materialities that

can, at the ideological level, be manipulated and recreated at the service of the living as agents in the construction, maintenance or changing of the group identity and social relations. Fourthly, we also presuppose that the actors who have access to the symbolic modification, transformation and manipulation of the bodies are agents of creation, transmission and alteration of the power relationships.

## THE DATA AND THE INTERPRETATIONS

In the last decades, the development of some projects related to the Bronze Age in the North of Portugal, Galicia and the Asturias,<sup>1</sup> as well as the growth of

<sup>1</sup> Namely the ones directed by Vítor Oliveira Jorge and Susana Oliveira Jorge in “Campo Arqueológico da Serra da Aboboreira”, in Douro Litoral (1978 to 1980), those coordinated by the author of this article in Minho entitled “As comunidades do Bronze Final na bacia do médio Cávado: regularidades e especificidades” (1989 to 1999), “A reconstituição da Paisagem no Entre-Douro-e-Minho, desde os meados do III aos finais do II milénios AC” (2001 to 2007) and “O corpo na paisagem: ritos e crenças na Idade do Bronze do Noroeste Peninsular” (2007), as well as the one by Domingos Cruz and Raquel Vilaça, in Beira Alta named “Práticas Funerárias da Idade do Bronze da Beira Alta”. In Galicia we highlight the project “As cistas e o seu entorno: estudo dunha das realidades do mundo funerário da Idade do Bronce en Galicia” which took place from 1995 on, developed by Ramón Fábregas

enterprise and rescue archaeology allowed us to know a significant number of new funerary contexts, integrate ancient findings and obtain a number of radiocarbon dates related to this type of materialities, whose interpretations have triggered some monographic and synthesis publications on this issue (Jorge 1982, 1989, 1991; Fábregas 1993b; Fábregas & Ruiz-Gálvez Priego 1994; Fábregas & Bradley 1995; Fábregas & Ruiz-Gálvez Priego 1997; Bettencourt 1997; Arias Cabal & Armendáriz 1998; Cruz 1998; Fábregas & Vilaseco Vázquez 1998; Bettencourt 1999; Boveda *et al.* 1999; Vilaça & Cruz 1999; Barroso *et al.* 2007b; Bettencourt 2008, 2009a, 2009b, forthcoming; Bettencourt & Meijide 2009). Taking this panorama into account we have deemed a detailed exposition on the empiric ground that sustained this work unnecessary; our option has been instead the presentation, in two attached tables, of a list of tomb contexts radiometrically dated.

It should be stressed that despite being different in respect to the various chronological periods and the various NW regions of the Iberian Peninsula, the empirical ground doesn't fail to be meaningful and susceptible of socially and ideologically based interpretations, albeit on the broad scale of analysis, once overcome the presupposition that this region was characterized by the inexistence of funerary practices worthy of study from the Middle Bronze on.

### Architectures and contexts

All along the Bronze Age of NW Iberia, the communities both built up a wide variety of monuments intended to the funerary-religious practices and used old tombs and natural spaces for the same purpose. Therefore, in all chronological-cultural periods, corpses or cremated bones were deposited in small monuments under traditional megalithic *tumuli*, in cists, in plane graves and in pits opened in the rocky substratum, i.e. in architectures whose constructive investment was relatively small if compared to those from the Neolithic. Simultaneously, evidences show the reuse of ancient megalithic monuments mainly in corridor dolmens and their adjacent areas, as well as the use of mines, caves or shelters (Tables 3.1 and 3.2).

As far as the geographic distribution of these materialities is concerned, we believe, in line with Ian Hodder (1990), that the places for deposition of the dead as well as the type of architectural solutions associated with them are in no way arbitrary but rather constitute metaphors for the social structuration process and are closely related to the different ways how the communities eventually interacted and viewed the natural environment.

It was grounded on these premises that we have framed the hypothesis that societies strongly linked to cereal-

related agricultural activities have probably conceived their architectures and funerary practices in a globally different way from those linked to an essentially pastoral way of life and living in environments at a higher altitude (Bettencourt 2008, forthcoming).

The former ones would have buried their dead in simple structures, discrete or even "invisible" like the cists, the plane graves and the pits, frequently covered with gross sand and without "*tumuli*". These were presumably located near one another, i.e. in concentrated necropolises, in little prominent places in the surroundings or inside the settlements and could hardly be identified by elements from outside the community (Fig. 3.1). This seems to be evidenced, for example, in Fraga do Zorro (Ourense), where at least a pit cremation was spotted in the bosom of a settlement from the Early Bronze Age (Fábregas 2001; Prieto Martínez *et al.*, 2009 a/b), in Cimalha (Felgueiras, Oporto), where a settlement with at least one occupation from the Middle Bronze Age lodged a necropolis of plane graves (Almeida & Fernandes 2008; Bettencourt 2008, forthcoming) or in Pego (Braga, Minho) where a necropolis of plane graves and little pits was surrounded by a palisade encircling a small settlement from the Late Bronze Age (Sampaio *et al.* 2008; Bettencourt 2008). These features hint at effectively sedentary communities with a strong territorial sense, owning a deep knowledge of the territory they inhabited. Here dead need not be "signalled" because it is not forgotten. It's there, next to the settlement, in the memory of those who share this space everyday and in a great interaction with the remaining areas of daily life.

As regards the communities mostly associated with mountain and hill landscapes, eventually relying more on pastoral practices and with ways of life that would implicate a greater mobility, we believe they would be the ones responsible for the construction of more visible funerary structures (monuments under *tumuli*), in dispersed necropolises, distant from the residential sites, in a perception of the world that still appears to privilege the "marking for posterity" of the sites of the dead (Fig. 3.2). Maybe this is the reason why they have been reportedly located in some impressive places with a wide visual scope, feature which is highlighted by D. Cruz & R. Vilaça (1999) for Beira Alta as they consider these architectures to be markers of sacred places, eventually of the gathering of people from the neighbourhood or boundary.

The reuses of megalithic tombs are common in all the NW sites where these constructions occur, i.e. in valley and altitude places. If we have in mind what P. Bourdieu (1989) says on the role of the historical legacy, then the actions inherent to such reuses seem to translate, on the one hand, that these sites of ancestors still exerted a strong symbolism during the Bronze Age and, on the other hand, the need to control the past and the story of the mythical personages, who are now meant to be incorporated at the service of the new ideological and

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Tab. 3.1. Burial contexts in the Bronze Age in the NW Iberia, radiocarbon dated

Structures	Funerary rites	C <sup>14</sup> data: 2 sigma cal.	Bibliography
<b>Pits</b> of <i>Boucinhas</i> , Ponte de Lima	Cremation (?)	XXIV-XX	Bettencourt forthcoming
Pit of <i>Cameixa</i> , Ourense	Cremation (?)	XXI	Criado Boado <i>et alii</i> 2000
Pit of <i>A Fraga do Zorro</i> , Ourense	Cremation	XIX-XVII	Fábregas 2001; Prieto Martínez <i>et alii</i> 2008b
Pit surrounded by post holes of <i>Vale Ferreiro</i> , Fafe	–	XIII-X	Bettencourt <i>et alii</i> 2005
Pits in <i>Pego</i> necropolis, Braga	–	IX/VIII-VI	Sampaio <i>et alii</i> 2008; Bettencourt forthcoming
<b>Flat tombs</b> of <i>Tapado da Caldeira</i> , Baião (necropolis)	Inhumation	XVII-XV	Jorge 1980a; 1980b; 1983
Flat tombs of <i>Pego</i> , Braga (necropolis)	Inhumation	IX/VIII-VI	Sampaio <i>et alii</i> 2008; Bettencourt forthcoming
Little <b>cist</b> of <i>Agro de Nogueira</i> , Melide, Corunha	Cremation	XXVI-XXIV	Bettencourt & Meijide 2009
Cist of <i>Quinta de Água Branca</i> , Vila Nova de Cerveira	Inhumation	XXI-XVIII	Bettencourt forthcoming
Cist of <i>A Forxa</i> , Os Rios, Ourense	Inhumation	XVIII-XVI	Prieto Martínez <i>et alii</i> 2008a
Cist-like structures of <i>Sola IIb</i> , Braga	–	XVII-XVI	Bettencourt 1997, 1999
Cists of <i>Agra de Antas</i> , Esposende	Inhumation	XV-XII	Cruz & Gonçalves 1998/1999; Bettencourt 1999
Cists of <i>Monte da Ola</i> , Viana do Castelo	Inhumation	XIII-X	Dinis & Bettencourt 2004
Little cists of <i>Paranho</i> , Viseu (necropolis)	Cremation	XII-XI (weighted average)	Cruz 1997
Little cist of the settlement of <i>Santinha</i> , Amares	Cremation (?)	X	Bettencourt 1997, 2001
Little cist of <i>Chao Samartín</i> , Grandas de Salime	Secondary and partial inhumation (calvaria)	IX-VIII	Villa & Cabo 2003
<b>Little tumulus</b> of <i>Reboreda 1</i> , Corunha	Inhumation (?)	XXV-XXI	Vaquero Lastres 1995a; 1995b
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Meninas do</i> <i>Crasto 4</i> , Baião	–	XXIV-XXII	Jorge 1982; Jorge <i>et alii</i> 1988
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Serra da</i> <i>Muna 1</i> , Viseu	–	XXIII-XXII	Cruz <i>et alii</i> 1998a
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Serra da</i> <i>Muna 2</i> , Viseu	–	XXI-XX	Cruz <i>et alii</i> 1998a
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Outeiro de Gregos</i> <i>I</i> , Baião (Peripheral structure)	–	XXII-XVIII	Jorge 1993
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Outeiro de Gregos</i> <i>I</i> , Baião (Peripheral structure)	–	XVIII-XVI	Jorge 1993
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Piedrafita 5</i> , Asturias	–	XVIII-XI	Blas Cortina 1985
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Outeiro de</i> <i>Gregos 5</i> , Baião	–	XVII-XV	Jorge <i>et alii</i> 1988, Jorge 1993, Cruz 1992
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Casinha</i> <i>Derribada 3</i> , Viseu	–	XV-XIII	Cruz <i>et alii</i> 1998b
Mound of <i>Ponte da Pedra</i> , Corunha (reuse: pit no. 2)	–	XV-X	Vaquero Lastres 1999

Structures	Funerary rites	C <sup>14</sup> data: 2 sigma cal.	Bibliography
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Sr<sup>a</sup> da Ouvida 7</i> , Castro Daire	Rites of fire	XIV-XII	Cruz & Vilaça 1999
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Sr<sup>a</sup> da Ouvida 11</i> , Castro Daire	Rites of fire	XI-X	Cruz & Vilaça 1999
Little <i>tumulus</i> of <i>Sr<sup>a</sup> da Ouvida 12</i> , Castro Daire	Rites of fire	X-IX	Cruz & Vilaça 1999
<b>Tomb 1</b> of <i>Vale Ferreiro</i> , Fafe	Inhumation	XXII-XIX	Bettencourt <i>et alii</i> 2002a; 2003
<b>Cave</b> of <i>Fuentenegrosso</i> , Peñamellera Alta/Llanes, Asturias	Inhumation	VIII-VI	Barroso <i>et alii</i> 2007a; Barroso <i>et alii</i> 2007b
<b>Undetermined structure</b> of <i>Castro de La Campa Torres</i> , Gijón	Secondary and partial inhumation (half of a jaw)	VIII-VI	Mercadal 2001



Fig. 3.1. The Cimalha (Felgueiras, Oporto) necropolis of plane graves near the settlement (after Almeida & Fernandes 2008, adapted)

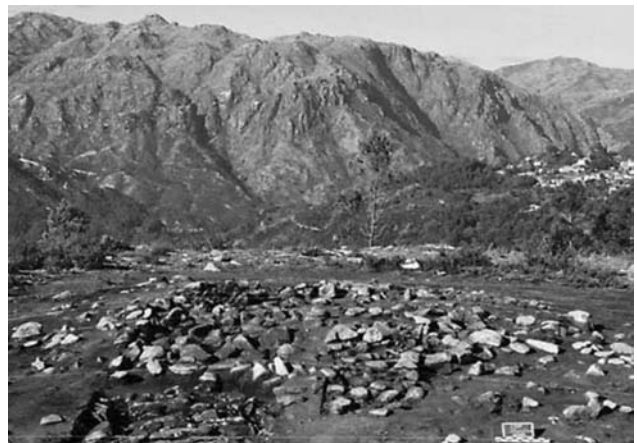


Fig. 3.2. The little *tumuli* of Mariolas (Vieira do Minho, Braga) in an impressive place (Picture from Archeoestudos)

natural cavities. As examples we cite the granite shelter of *Fragão da Pitorca* (Chaves, Trás-os-Montes) in the environs of the coetaneous settlement and the limy cave of *Fuentenegrosso* (Peñamellera Alta/Llanes, Asturias), far from any residential site.

social orders or the new cosmogonies (Bettencourt 2008).

It's interesting to verify that the reuses in the great dolmen are only the visible face of a series of acts and ceremonies occurring in the environs of these monuments, whose materialities (pits opened in the subsoil, depositions of ceramic containers, etc.) now start to be better known as contiguous areas are being intervened. This seems to be the case of *Bouça da Cova da Moura* (Maia, Oporto) (Ribeiro *et al.*, in this vol.) or in *Alto da Maronda* (Vila Verde, Minho).

The depositions in cave or in shelter occur mainly in the most oriental areas where such natural formations can be found, evidencing the symbolic importance of this type of

In the cases where the communities seem to have a way of life strongly dependent on the mine exploration it is interesting to verify the existence of some intentional burials in the very interior of the mines, as in *Aramo* and *El Milagro* in the Asturian Early Bronze, perhaps materializing the role of the body as offering in these sites that surely have a great mythical weight, but are simultaneously used for copper ore extraction (Blas Cortina 2003, 2005).

### The mortuary rituals and the funeral

According to A. Robben (2006) the mortuary rituals are universal and show people's resistance to accepting biological death and their desire to prolong the departure from the dead through a process of phased transitions. In

this way, death evokes moral and social obligations expressed in culturally funeral practices (Hertz 1960). The studies accomplished in the scope of the anthropology of death have shown the great complexity of these phenomena, and so the existing social prescriptions in respect to dead and the funeral, the gestures and the emotions are now irremediably lost for the archaeologist, constrained to the interpretation of a minimal number of practices. Consequently, we will only be able to assay a few hypotheses on the social meaning of the treatment given to the bodies and on the rites inherent to the depositions which accompanied them in the final moment or in the post-liminal phase of this rite of passage, when the deceased finally passes to the land of dead and mourners return to the society (Van Gennep 1960).

### *The treatment of the body*

Despite the conservation of skeletons being residual in the NW due to the fact that the soils are quite acid making any attempt of association with the different types of funerary architectures, geographic contexts and treatment of bodies impossible, the discovery of some corpses in good state of conservation allowed, in association with other variables, interpretations on the treatment of the body in an ample scale of analysis. Consequently, we can now highlight the preponderance of the practice of inhumation, both in different depositional contexts and throughout the entire Bronze Age (Table 3.1). As examples we cite the corpses in dorsal decubitus in the cist of Quinta da Água Branca (Vila Nova de Cerveira, Minho) and in Agra de Antas (Esposende, Minho) from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, respectively (Fig. 3.3); in lateral decubitus in the mines of El Milagro (Onís, Asturias) and El Aramo (Riosa, Asturias) and in the Cave of Fuentenegrosso (Peñamellera Alta/Llanes, Asturias) from the Early and Late Bronze Age, respectively and squatting in the tomb 1 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe) from the Early Bronze Age. As regards other inhumations, the shape of the red clay deposited in the base of tomb 2 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe, Minho) is noteworthy, suggesting the deposition of a corpse in dorsal decubitus, as well as the shape and dimensions of the sediment enriched with organic substance resulting from the decomposition of the corpse in the plane grave no. 11 of the necropolis of Pego (Braga, Minho) (Fig. 3.4). The very dimensions of many cists and plane graves support likewise the hypothesis of inhumation. The maintenance of this rite until the end of the Late Bronze, hypothesis that we had already suggested (Bettencourt 1995a), is of utmost importance, for it allows, once more, to mitigate the idea that incineration is the most common practice during this period in the peninsular Northwest (Barroso Bermejo *et al.* 2007b) and to presume the persistence of a cosmological vision where the physical body is essential.

Even though the manipulation of parts of the body and their posterior deposition, in several contexts, is believed to be a very old practice in the NW, we could only spot it in the monumentalized enclosure of Chao Samartín (Astu-



Fig. 3.3. The corpse in dorsal decubitus in one of the cist of Agra de Antas (Esposende, Minho) (Picture from Museu de História Natural, Oporto)

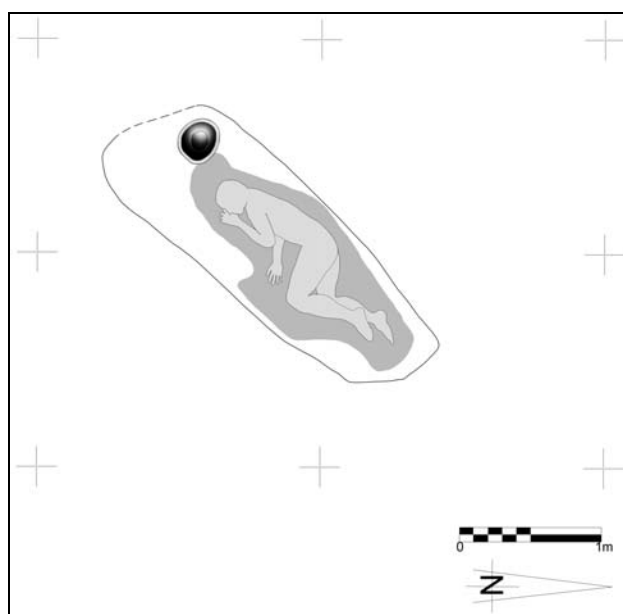


Fig. 3.4. The plane grave no. 11 of the necropolis of Pego (Braga, Minho) (Reconstitution of Jorge Guedes)

rias) (Villa Valdez & Cabo 2003) (Fig. 3.5) and probably in the settlement of La Campa Torres (Mercadal 2001), materializing, at the symbolic level, an apparent absence of dichotomy between the world of the dead and that of the living during the Late Bronze or, who knows, the incorporation of the properties of a certain dead and mythicized person in contexts of actions related to the living.

Although previously we had only admitted the practice of cremation in the NW from the late Middle Bronze Age (Bettencourt 1995a) or the Late Bronze<sup>2</sup> on, we recognize today that it takes place at least from the late Chalcolithic on, i.e. in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the III<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, more

<sup>2</sup> Position we have also defended on the basin of the medium and inferior course of river Cávado, in Minho (Bettencourt 1999, 2000c).

Tab. 3.2. Megalithic monuments reused during the Bronze Age with C<sup>14</sup> datings

Structures	Funerary rites	C <sup>14</sup> data: 2 sigma cal.	Bibliography
Passage grave of <i>Chã de Parada 1</i> , Baião (reuse of the atrium)	–	XXVII-XXII	Cruz 1992
Megalithic tomb of Cabras, Baião (reuse?)	–	XXV-XXII	Cruz 1992
Mound of <i>Illade 3</i> , Corunha (reuse)	–	XXV-XXI	Vaquero Lastres 1995a; 1995b
Megalithic tomb of <i>Mourela 7</i> , Corunha (reuse)	–	XXIV-XXI	Fábregas 1990/1991
Passage grave of <i>Arquinha da Moura</i> , Tondela (reuse)	Inhumation	XXII-XX	Cunha 1995
Passage grave of <i>Forno dos Mouros 5CI</i> , Corunha (reuse)	–	XXI-XVIII	Mañana 2005
Passage grave of <i>Madorras 1</i> , Sabrosa (reuse)	–	XX-XXVII	Cruz & Gonçalves 1994; 1995
Passage grave of <i>Orca da Penela 1</i> , Tondela (reuse)	–	XX-XXVII	Cruz 2001
Megalithic tomb of <i>Monte da Deva III</i> , Asturias (reuse)	–	XIX-XVI	Blas Cortina 2004
Megalithic tomb of <i>Prados</i> , Arcos dos Valdevez (reuse)	–	XVIII-XVI	Bettencourt forthcoming
Passage grave of <i>Madorra da Granxa</i> , Lugo (reuse of the <i>tumulus</i> )	–	XVII-XV	Chão Alvarez & Alvarez Merayo 2000
Passage grave of <i>Orca de Pedralta</i> , Viseu, Portugal (reuse)	–	XIII-X	Personal info by D. Cruz
Passage grave of <i>Alto da Barreira</i> , Corunha (reuse of the <i>tumulus</i> )	–	XII-IX	Alonso & Bello 1997
Mound of <i>Rapadouro 1</i> , Vila Nova de Paiva (reuse)	Cremation (?)	XI-IX	Cruz & Gonçalves 1998/1999
Passage grave of <i>Cabritos 1</i> , Baião, Portugal (pit near the Neolithic funerary chamber)	–	X-IX	Jorge 1982; Jorge <i>et alii</i> 1988
Megalithic mound of <i>Ponte da Pedra</i> , Corunha (reuse)	–	IX-VI	Vaquero Lastres 1999

precisely between 2560 and 2300 BC considering the AMS date obtained for the cremated remains in the small cist of Agro de Nogueira (Toques, Coruña) (Bettencourt & Meijide 2009) and that it lasts through the Early Bronze, as evidenced by the pit incineration in Fraga do Zorro (Ourense) (Prieto Martínez *et al.* 2009a/b) datable from the early XIX<sup>th</sup> to the mid XVII<sup>th</sup> century BC (Fábregas Valcarce 2001). Nevertheless we ignore the intensity, the geographic amplitude and the meaning of this practice during this period and the Middle Bronze Age given that the incinerations of the cist-like structures of Gandón (Cangas de Morrazo, Pontevedra) and of the cist of Praia da Rola (Muiños, Ourense), which can be generically inserted between these chronological boundaries (Peña Saints 1985; Bettencourt 2009a), have not been radiometrically dated. Also the signs of ashes and coals in several monuments under *tumuli* in Beira Alta allow us

only to admit the importance of rites of fire in the context of the sepulchral world of these periods (Vilaça & Cruz 1999). Known from the Late Bronze Age are bones of possible cremations in the dolmen of Rapadouro 1 (Vila Nova de Paiva, Beira Alta) and in the small cist necropolis in Paranho (Viseu, Beira Alta) (Fig. 3.6) (Cruz 1997; 1998; Cruz *et al.* 1997). As deposits of cremation, the hardly interpretable pots from the Granjinhos structure (Braga, Minho) (Fig. 3.7) and the cist of the Santinha settlement (Amares, Minho) (Bettencourt 1995b, 1997, 2000a, 2001) may have also been used, and so it is possible to admit that the incineration rites coexist with those of inhumation in the same region and at the same time, in a complexity of intentions of very difficult interpretation. Who would have the right to be inhumated or cremated? Which role would play both practices in social terms? These are only some of many possible questions.





Fig. 3.5. The little cist containing a skull in the monumentalized enclosure of Chao Samartín (Asturias)

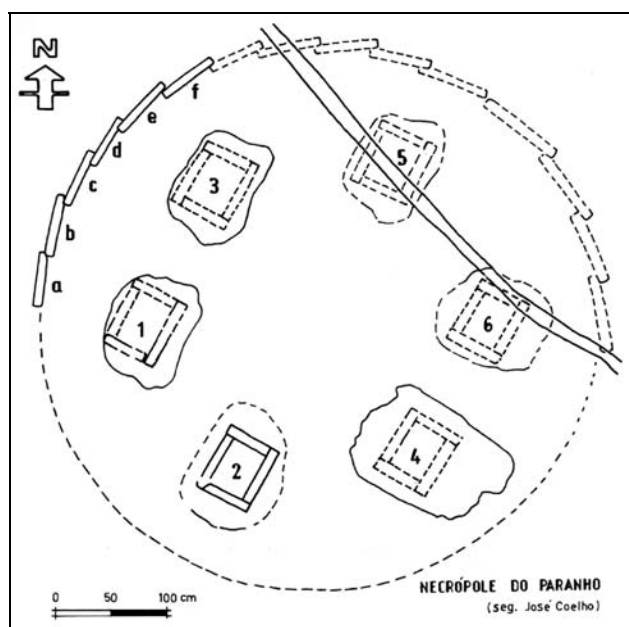


Fig. 3.6. The small cist necropolis of Paranho (Viseu, Beira Alta) (after Cruz 1997)



Fig. 3.7. Pots from the cremation structure of Granjinhos (Braga, Minho) (Picture from Museu D. Diogo de Sousa, Braga)

### *The social meaning of the gifts*

As far as the funerary offerings are concerned, the first illation is that in the lowlands, in all the necropolises from the Early Bronze Age or in sites of corpse deposition initiated during this period but frequented until the Late Bronze Age,<sup>3</sup> the norm seems to have been the burial of a body that was “distinguished” from all the other ones either for lying in a more elaborated tomb, like no. 1 and 2 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe) (Fig. 3.8 and 3.9), or above all for the type of exceptional offerings which were awarded him/her, namely artifacts in bronze (hilt tang daggers, “Palmela type” arrow-heads, flat axes), in gold (spirals, rings, diadems and neckbands), in silver (spirals) or even in rock (archer’s bracers) (Fig. 3.10 and 3.11). The same phenomenon seems to occur in altitude areas, where only in the Early Bronze Age corpses with exceptional artifacts were deposited inside small or medium-sized *tumuli* or even in the interior of megalithic monuments, as it is the case of the Aboboreira necropolis (Baião, Oporto). Such situation changes as the Middle Bronze Age advances, time from when the offerings of great social value disappear and the discretion, the scarcity or the absence of these ones seem to be the norm.

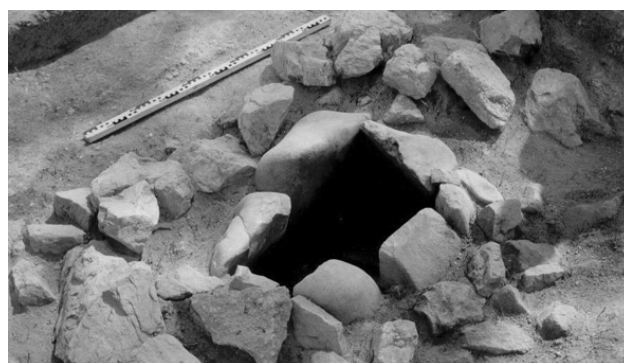


Fig. 3.8. Tomb no. 1 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe, Minho, Portugal)



Fig. 3.9. Tomb no. 2 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe, Minho, Portugal)

<sup>3</sup> As it is the case of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe, Minho, Portugal) (Bettencourt 2008).



Fig. 3.10. Gold rings of tomb no. 2 of Vale Ferreiro (Fafe, Minho, Portugal) (Picture from Museu D. Diogo de Sousa, Braga)



Fig. 3.11. Copper dagger and archer's bracers of one of the cists of Agra da Insua/Pedra Figueira/Pedra Marrada (Carnota, Corunha, Galiza) (Picture from Beatriz Comendador Rey)

The interpretation of this observation has allowed us to frame the hypothesis of the existence of distinct ideological conceptions on the social role of the corpse throughout the Bronze Age.

Hence during the Early Bronze Age, when the extensive occupation of many territories seems to take place, we presume that some bodies, very few in each community, would have been chosen and manipulated as materialities so as to act, at the symbolic and social level, as legitimators of the ownership of the new occupied territories and contribute to the construction and maintenance of the ideological and social order thus formed (Bettencourt 2008, 2009b). Perhaps these personages have turned into new ancestors, thus being able to function via different memory transmission processes as symbols of maintenance of a certain group identity in a certain place. In this perspective we suggest that the metal objects that accompanied these bodies were only representative forms of a symbolic power, materialized in these new ancestors and in the agents who manipulated them and kept them active (Bettencourt forthcoming). Such assumption moves us away from the conceptions which, within the framework of New Archaeology, have been interpreting these graves as

belonging to princes, chiefs or high dignitaries, in the scope of very hierarchized societies, hypothesis that does not find support in the remaining materialities of this period.

Such fact may probably be related to the consolidation of the territorialization processes of previously occupied lands with new structuration of the communities thus formed. It is possible to admit that we would be facing a situation where, once legitimated the ownership of the new territories occupied in the Early Bronze Age, from the Middle Bronze Age on and in spite of the contingencies, dead and the corpse would have lost their importance as memory and social identity referents, as defended by R. Bradley (2000), the identity mechanisms now drawing upon the descendants and the individual ancestry rather than in the filiation to a certain ancestor (Barret 1994). Throughout the Late Bronze Age the same scenario seems to perpetuate, remaining the necropolises as sites where only the blood relations and the familiar ties would be affirmed.

Anyway, the persistence of special sites with only a few bodies frequented from the Early Bronze Age through the Late Bronze Age and hardly classified as necropolises (Vale Ferreiro in Minho, etc.) (Bettencourt 2008, 2009b) compels us to interpretive prudence and hinder the simplification of these phenomena and the role of the body during the Bronze Age. Let us remember the isolated corpse from the Late Bronze Age in the Cave of Fuentenegrosso (Peñamellera Alta/Llanes, Asturias), apparently buried far from the coetaneous settlement, whose role may have been that of an offering to the cavities or the very hill where they were located (Barroso *et al.* 2007a; Barroso *et al.* 2007b). In this interpretive scheme, there remain to be explained some materialities which seem to endow some bodies from the Late Bronze Age with individuality vis-à-vis the other ones. We mean the deposit of artifacts eventually indicating certain personal skills of the deceased, as it is the case of a spindle whorl found in the grave no 8 of Pego or a loom weight and a flake with traces of use found in the grave no 7 of Pego, maybe hinting at an activity associated with the weaving, and the very slight increase of exceptional metal artifacts, mainly of personal adornment, found either in incineration graves (bracelets of two burials in Paranho) or in inhumation ones (bracelets of the feminine corpse of Fuentenegrosso), perhaps individualizing elements of the feminine gender, working hypothesis that requires confirmation.

Along with the exceptional offerings from the Early Bronze Age, the remaining ones are characterized by a restricted number of ceramic forms like the small pots,<sup>4</sup> more common in the septentrional area of the NW, the truncated-conical ones, more usual between the south of Galicia and the Center of Portugal (Fig. 3.12) and some exotic rare forms. From the Middle Bronze Age on the

<sup>4</sup> With re-entrant rim, vertical tall rim and everted rim.



Fig. 3.12. The truncated-conical vessel from the one of the megalithic monument of Serra (Esposende, Minho) (Picture from Câmara Municipal de Esposende)



Fig. 3.14. Carinated bowl from the dolmen of Lordelo de Cima/Chafé (Viana do Castelo, Minho)

deposits of ceramic containers become almost exclusive, seeming to be scarcer inside the monuments under *tumuli* of the highlands than in the graves connected with settlements of the lowlands. The truncated-conical vessels and some small pots, sometimes with carination in the belly, remain, and the vessels of horizontal rim appear as well as the tall and very tall neck pots (profusely decorated with plastic motifs), especially in the most occidental NW façade. In the Late Bronze Age the truncated-conical forms disappear, the vessels of horizontal rim (Fig. 3.13) and the small pots/mugs remain and the carinated bowls (Fig. 3.14), the urns and the pots, mostly smooth, appear, at least for the most occidental façade.

Such permanencies and innovations suggest, equally, processes of ideological change in continuity throughout the Bronze Age and as far as the long-time effects are concerned.

Another characteristic to be analyzed is the fact that in the Late Bronze Age almost all the forms used as offerings or as body containers were handled, indistinctly, in funerary and residential contexts, which could eventually constitute

an argument in support of the hypothesis that the acts related with dead interrelate more and more at the symbolic level with other actions of everyday life, such situation being in accordance with the loss of value of the corpse as mechanism of identity and social memory.

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Analyzed the structures, the sites and the existing mortuary practices in the Northwest Bronze Age, we will now assay some considerations on the social role of death and the body in articulation with other materialities.

If during the Early Bronze Age the corpses and the sites where they were deposited seem to have played a more important role as agents of group identity, legitimization of territory and power maintenance and negotiation, from the Middle Bronze Age on the “expressed social equality” in the funerary world may simply suggest the loss of importance of the corpse, the funerary practices and the necropolises as mechanisms of identity and power. Therefore it can be presumed that some communities may have transferred their negotiation scenarios of power and



Fig. 3.13. Vessels of horizontal rim from the necropolis of Pego (Braga, Minho) (Picture from Museu D. Diogo de Sousa, Braga)

social identity into other contexts of action more in connection with the world of the living, possibly into sites with rock engravings, sites of deposition of metal artefacts and into the settlements themselves (Bettencourt 2005a, 2007, 2008). It should be noticed that even when built up in perishable materials those settlements become larger and larger, more impressive and sometimes monumentalized, above all in the Late Bronze Age, functioning as sites of greater significance and of physical and symbolic reference in space (Bettencourt 2005b, 2008). This also reveals a greater importance of the live body in the structuration of identity and power, which could be directly related to the increase – albeit a slight one – of the signs of cremation, phenomenon that translates the loss of importance of the physical body, now transformed and less visible.

But despite the verisimilitude of such hypothesis, the maintenance of inhumation, i.e. of the physical body throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Ages seems to suggest the continuity of the importance of the corpse at the ideological level. In this perspective we tend to interpret the manipulation of certain parts of the body and their deposition in “secondary” contexts as actions that aim to transfer certain properties associated to a given personage into new contexts of action. The skeletons would function then as relics, sometimes foundational ones (Bermejo *et al.* 2007b), extracted from mythical personages and therefore active in social and symbolic terms and would constitute linking elements, at the symbolic level, between the world of the dead and certain sites frequented by the living.

In short, if it is possible to admit that the investigation of the last years allowed a considerable knowledge on dead during the Bronze Age in the peninsular Northwest, it is also true that our interpretations still privilege an ample scale of analysis, being therefore necessarily reducing in terms of the contingency phenomena that seem yet to arise and so should instead be taken as working hypotheses guiding new investigation projects. It is equally important to keep in mind that the reasoning of death by itself allows only a truncated perception of the past, reason why the new projects will have to privilege not only the regional studies but also a holistic vision of the societies that occupied this vast territory between approximately the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the III<sup>rd</sup> and the onset of the I<sup>st</sup> millennia BC.

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